

The Kuna & the Mola Cooperative

Most Kuna Indians live on the San Blas Islands, in Panama City, or in Colon, Panama. Although the Kuna have had extensive contact with Europeans and other outsiders for over 400 years, they have maintained their independence. In 1926 the Kuna rebelled against local Panamanian authorities, and an autonomous territory, now called Kuna Yala, was established.

Toward the end of the 19th century, Kuna women began to experiment with a new process that led to *mola* making. At first they painted designs originally used for body decorations onto cotton, wrap-around skirts. Then they began to cut and stitch geometric patterns in blue and red fabric onto the bottom of chemise-like blouses worn over the painted skirts. As Kuna women developed more ways to cut and sew designs, they filled more of the space on the blouses. Red, yellow, and blue – the colors they preferred for body painting – are still popular, and the geometric patterns they call *mugan* or “grandmother designs” are made with pride to this day.

Inspiration for pictorial designs for the elaborate, multicolored *molos* comes from the shapes of plants and animals, from events in traditional Kuna culture, like village gatherings or girls’ ceremonies, and also from comic books, greeting cards, product labels, and activities outside of Kuna Yala such as boxing, the circus, the space program, and even objects from archaeological excavations.

Kuna women are articulate critics of their art, commenting on skill in cutting and sewing, complexity and visibility of designs, attention to completeness and patterning of repetition, and interest of the subject matter. They emphasize conservatism yet appreciate originality, producing a creative tension between tradition (rules, repetition, and balance) and innovation (pushing beyond the rules and using subtle variation and asymmetry).

Formed in 1964 with support from the Peace Corps, the Cooperativa Productores de Molos has 2,000 members in Kuna Yala and Panama City. Run by Kuna women, the co-op provides not only a setting for women to gather, talk, and work together but an international market for *mola* products. Kuna women make traditional *mola* blouses to wear, in addition to shirts, vests, patches, festive pillows and stuffed animals, tropical birds and fish for the commercial market using *mola* techniques. *Mola* making has become a significant component of the Kuna economy that specifically empowers women.

Today one challenge facing the Kuna is how to retain their autonomy and maintain their cultural identity in the face of outside economic forces. Another is the appropriation of their symbols, designs, and sewing methods by non-Kuna manufacturers of *mola*-like products. For example, the corporation My Name is Panama uses *mola* pieces of varying quality in its popular clothing line, buying cheaply and selling at great profit. Idalide Gonzales, an assistant in the co-op store, speaking of her dream for the co-op, says, “In five years, my hope is that My Name is Panama has nothing to do with our *molos* and that the co-op will be number one.”

— Mari Lyn Salvador



A mola artisan stitches a cut design of colored fabric to a piece of fabric of another color on Cartisuitup Island in Kuna Yala, the San Blas reserve of the Kuna Indians of Panama. This procedure will be repeated over and over again in a way unique to the Kuna. Although mola making as we know it today is a relatively recent art form, Kuna men and women consider molas integral to their culture and identity.

Photo by Mari Lyn Salvador

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